

Opening Statement of the Honorable Brett Guthrie
Republican Leader, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
“Oversight of Federal Efforts to Combat the Spread of Illicit Fentanyl”
July 16, 2019

As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you, Chair DeGette, for holding this important hearing.

The Energy and Commerce Committee has been steadfast in its efforts to help combat the opioid crisis, with both investigations and legislation. Whether it was the Committee’s investigations into opioid distributors, patient brokering, or the major opioid manufacturers – we’ve continued to ask questions and demand answers for the American public.

When it comes to legislation, this Committee lead the way on passage of the 21st Century Cures Act, the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, and the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act. I was proud to work on these three landmark bills, which are advancing treatment and recovery initiatives, improving prevention, protecting communities, and bolstering our efforts to fight deadly illicit synthetic drugs like fentanyl.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is 80 to 100 times stronger than morphine and 50 times more potent than heroin. For many years, pharmaceutical fentanyl has been utilized as a powerful pain medicine to treat severe pain, such as advanced cancer pain, commonly used in the form of a patch on the skin or a “lollipop.” But pharmaceutical fentanyl is not why we’re here today – we’re here today because of concerns over illicit, or illegally manufactured, fentanyl.

The fentanyl crisis is particularly dangerous because of its high potency and the small amount required to potentially cause an overdose. It has become a powerful additive to drugs such as heroin, cocaine, or counterfeit pills – with or without the user’s knowledge. According to the CDC, in 2017 there were more than 28,000 deaths involving synthetic opioids in the United States – which is more deaths than from any other type of opioid. Further, overdose death rates from synthetic opioids increased across all demographics, county urbanization levels, and numerous states.

A little bit of fentanyl goes a long way – which makes it harder for law enforcement to track where and how fentanyl is being purchased. Fentanyl can be purchased on the internet—both in the open source and on the dark web—and can be purchased pseudo-anonymously using bitcoin or crypto currency.

In addition to being smuggled across our borders, fentanyl can be mailed in small quantities through the postal service or express consignment carriers, and therefore has a higher likelihood of coming into the United States undetected. These circumstances require a much different approach to intelligence, interdiction, and law enforcement compared to methods that may be better suited for what might be considered a more common drug smuggling operation.

The threat is real and has been growing over the past few years. According to Customs and Border Protection data, in fiscal year 2015, 70 pounds of fentanyl were seized in the United States. In comparison, for fiscal year 2018, more than 2,000 pounds of fentanyl were seized. Further, for fiscal year 2019 to date, there have been 1,703 pounds of fentanyl seized. That is enough fentanyl for more than 600 million lethal doses of fentanyl, and we still have four more months of data to account for before we will know the total for this year.

I want to acknowledge some of the efforts and accomplishments of this Administration, including but not limited to HHS establishing an interdepartmental substance use disorder coordinating committee; China pledging to add fentanyl to its list of controlled substances; increasing shipment-tracking responsibilities and coordination among multiple

entities; and disruption efforts such as taking down an entire online black market. While we are already seeing new tools and resources provided and utilized as a result of this Committee and the Administration's work – the threat still exists, and our work is not done.

I want to thank all of the witnesses for being here today. I look forward to hearing from all of you about successes we have had in combatting our nation's fentanyl threat, but also how the threat has changed, what challenges remain, and what more we, in Congress, can do to be partners in this fight.